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Viewing cable 10TASHKENT47, Uzbekistan: Freedom of Expression under Strain \

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Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#10TASHKENT47**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
10TASHKENT47	2010-01-28 13:35	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Tashkent

Appears in these articles:

http://www.letemps.ch/swiss_papers

VZCZCXRO0387
RR RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHSL
DE RUEHNT #0047/01 0281335
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 281335Z JAN 10
FM AMEMBASSY TASHKENT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1803
INFO ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
CIS COLLECTIVE
NATO EU COLLECTIVE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0080
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

2010-01-28 13:35:00 10TASHKENT47 Embassy Tashkent CONFIDENTIAL 10TASHKENT29|10TASHKENT34 VZCZCXRO0387\
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SENSITIVE \
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AMEMBASSY HELSINKI PASS TO AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG \
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK \
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG \
AMEMBASSY BELGRADE PASS TO AMEMBASSY PODGORICA \
AMEMBASSY ATHENS PASS TO AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI \

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SUBJECT: Uzbekistan: Freedom of Expression under Strain \

REF: 10 TASHKENT 34; 10 TASHKENT 29 \

CLASSIFIED BY: Holly Lindquist Thomas, P/E Officer, Tashkent; REASON: \ 1.4(B), (D) \

1. (SBU) Summary: Post continues to follow three cases \ involving constraints on freedom of expression. The defamation \ case against photographer Umida Ahmedova continues, with the latest \ information that she has refused an offer for amnesty in exchange \ for a guilty plea. Authorities have opened charges of starting an \ illegal religious organization against popular soccer commentator \ and religious speaker Khayrulla Khamidov. Journalist Husniddin \ Kutbiddinov has reason to believe that his recent questioning by \ prosecutors is just the beginning, and that a criminal case is sure \ to follow. These cases argue for stepping up the "human dimension" \ component of our dialogue with Uzbekistan. End summary. \

Photographer Under Fire Gains International Support \

2. (U) As mentioned in Ref B, photographer Umida Ahmedova has \ been charged with defaming the country of Uzbekistan for pictures \ included in the documentaries "Customs of Men and Women" and "The \ Burden of Virginity." A state-sponsored panel of experts, made up \ of specialists in the fields of religion, culture, and psychology \ reviewed the two works in question and concluded that her works do \ in fact insult the country. A court could use this report as the \ basis for a guilty verdict in the case. If found guilty, Ahmedova \ could face heavy fines and jail time of up to five years. \

3. (U) On January 24, investigators called Ahmedova in for \ questioning and offered to grant her amnesty in return for a guilty \ plea. She refused, stating that she is guilty of nothing. Some \ publishers who worked on her photo album were also charged in the \ case and have reportedly accepted similar offers for amnesty. \

4. (C) The Swiss Embassy in Tashkent sponsored a book of \ Ahmedova's photography, printed in 2008, and also financed the \ first half of one of the documentaries in question. The Swiss \ Embassy discontinued its support for the remainder of the project \ after there were some concerns over the controversial nature of the \ subject matter. In a U.S. Embassy-sponsored briefing on January \ 25, Swiss Ambassador Anne Bauty brought with her several copies of \ the book, and briefly discussed the documentary. Although Bauty \ did not go into detail regarding the controversial nature of the \ project, she did voice her support for Ahmedova, stating that it is \ important to support artistic expression. Interestingly, an Uzbek \ human rights activist/journalist in attendance at the event stated \ that he had seen the complete documentary, and that he felt that \ Ahmedova had indeed gone too far in her depictions of Uzbekistan \ and its problems, given Uzbek cultural norms. \

5. (SBU) The Paris-based International Association of Art \ Critics (IAAC) has started a campaign in Ahmedova's defense, \ sending an appeal with nearly 1000 signatures to Uzbekistan's \ Interior and Foreign Ministries calling on Uzbek authorities to \ respect Ahmedova's universal right to freedom of expression. The \ Committee to Protect Journalists and other groups have called on \ Uzbek authorities to drop the charges. Ahmedova told us that she \ expects more serious charges to be filed against her in the coming \ days. \

6. (C) Comment: The book of Ahmedova's photography supported \

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by the Swiss Embassy shows beautiful pictures of Uzbekistan's \ varied people and landscapes, as well as some more controversial \ images of boys following a circumcision and a woman in a bikini. \ While these would probably not be considered "defamatory" to the \ western eye, they do not easily fit with the tightly-controlled \ image that the GOU prefers to portray of Uzbekistan. (One rumor \ floating about states that President's Karimov daughter, Gulnora, \

had the book in her home, and that when the elder Karimov saw it, \ he disapproved and prompted the subsequent court action.) The \ documentary most likely went much further than the book in \ portraying images not in line with "Uzbek values." But although \ there have been other negative depictions of Uzbekistan in the \ past, this is apparently the first case in independent Uzbekistan's \ short history where the GOU has clamped down on an artist in this \ way. We have flagged our deep concerns with the MFA, which is \ aware of the growing international reaction. While public \ expressions of USG concern would likely only cause the GOU to dig \ in its heels, we should continue to point out privately to GOU \ interlocutors the damage a trial and conviction could do. End \ comment. \

Influential Commentator Arrested and Held in Custody \

17. (SBU) On January 21, authorities arrested Khayrulla \ Khamidov for allegedly establishing an illegal religious \ organization. His family reported that the police arrived at 5am, \ searched the house for several hours, and then took Khamidov, along \ with several books and CDs, into custody. He has remained in \ custody since then. Khamidov is a prominent soccer commentator, \ but he is better-known for his sermons and articles on Islam. For \ years, he hosted a weekly radio broadcast called "Kholislik Sari" \ (Towards Fairness) in which he discussed the role of Islam in \ ordinary life. Although the program was discontinued in 2008, CDs \ of the broadcasts remain popular throughout Uzbekistan. He was \ also editor-in-chief of a popular newspaper "Odamlar Orasida" \ (Among People) that raised social issues before being shut down in \ July 2007. Since then he has worked as the deputy editor-in-chief \ of a sporting publication. Khamidov is also an alumni of the State \ Department's Edward R. Murrow International Visitor Program (2005), \ and has remained a close contact of the Embassy, although he has \ been cautious over the last few years with direct contact. \

18. (SBU) Khamidov was a popular speaker at weddings and other \ social occasions, and had gained a large following through his \ activities. There is an unconfirmed report that a video clip taken \ from a cell phone of one such social engagement is the basis for \ the charges against him. Khamidov was known to speak about social \ problems facing Uzbekistan, such as alcoholism, drug use, \ prostitution, and even human trafficking. He also tried to \ discourage women from going abroad to work and from wearing \ provocative clothing. Khamidov posted poems on the internet \ regarding these same general themes. He advocated living one's \ life in a manner consistent with Muslim values, but he generally \ did not espouse fundamentalist or radical ideas. Khamidov has \ reportedly been warned in the past about the danger of continuing \ his activities, and unknown assailants broke his nose and leg in \ two separate incidents in 2007 and 2008. \

19. (SBU) Authorities kept Khamidov in a pre-trial detention \ facility through last weekend, and on January 26 the Tashkent \ regional criminal court reportedly approved a motion to continue \ holding him in detention throughout the investigation of the \ charges. If found guilty, Khamidov could face heavy fines and up \ to five years in jail. \

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10. (C) The domestic and international internet websites \ covering Uzbekistan have been quick to cover this story, and some \ misinformation has resulted. The BBC reported on January 26 that \ influential former mufti Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf appealed to \ law-enforcement authorities to free Khamidov, and also said that \ Khamidov had only spoken to members of a more conservative brand of \ Islam (Salafiya) in an effort to persuade them of the incorrectness \ of their path. (Such a conversation could theoretically be the \ basis of the charges against Khamidov.) Relatives of Sodiq \ informed Embassy personnel, however, that he has had no involvement \ with Khamidov or his legal case, and the BBC report is without \ merit. \

11. (U) The Uzbek language services of the BBC and Radio Free \ Europe both published quotes from Khamidov's mother and lawyer \ about his current conditions. Both stated, using very similar \ language, that Khamidov is in good health and is being treated \ well, with adequate food and water. His mother was quoted as \ saying that she trusted that the State would step in and assist in \

this matter. \

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¶12. (C) Comment: Typically, the pre-trial detention period is \ the most dangerous time for a defendant, and is often when beatings \ occur in attempts to coerce a confession. The statements of \ Khamidov's attorney and family members regarding his conditions may \ well be inaccurate, designed to improve his situation or at least \ not add fuel to the fire during the investigation of the charges. \ It will be interesting to see if this is a successful tactic. If \ the case continues true to form, the investigation will be followed \ by a short trial, which will be followed by a lengthy prison term. \ End comment. \

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A Journalist Struggles Following an Interview with Prosecutors \

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¶13. (C) Husniddin Kutbiddinov was one of the journalists called \ in by prosecutors on January 5. (See Ref A.) Kutbiddinov told \ poloff on January 27 that he has not been harassed or pressured \ since that time, but he fears that charges against him are \ forthcoming. \

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¶14. (C) In his interview, authorities confronted Kutbiddinov with \ several articles he wrote under pseudonyms, and mentioned five \ pseudonyms they believed he has been using. Kutbiddinov had indeed \ written the articles in question, and has used four of the five \ pseudonyms in articles for an Almaty-based "Voice of Freedom" news \ website. In December 2007 authorities warned Kutbiddinov that he \ would face charges should he continue his work as a journalist in \ Uzbekistan, and he agreed to cease his activities. With that \ conversation in mind, while tempted to admit the truth, he denied \ writing the articles and using the pseudonyms. In response to his \ denial, the prosecutor smiled and told him, "we know what's been \ going on." \

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¶15. (C) Kutbiddinov is convinced that prosecutors are building a \ criminal case against him, and that it is only a matter of time \ before he is taken into custody. His family is struggling \ financially, in part because employers are unwilling to hire his \

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relatives. The only money coming in to support his wife, daughter, \ sister, and two nephews comes from the Almaty-based news website, \ and the authorities have already shown him that they are aware of \ the incoming Western Union transactions of the payments. In his \ interview, authorities hinted that it would be better for him to \ leave Uzbekistan, and Kutbiddinov is beginning to believe that \ leaving is his best course of action. Concerned that Uzbekistan's \ National Security Service has long arms into Bishkek and Almaty, he \ intends to apply for refugee status in Turkey, if he can collect \ the necessary resources needed for an extended stay for him and his \ family. In the meantime, he will continue to publish articles the \ best he can. \

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¶16. (C) Comment: (See paragraphs 6 and 12.) The cases against \ Khomidov and Kutbiddinov, while disturbing, do not represent a \ departure from previous tactics used by the GOU to silence \ dissenting voices. The charges against Ahmedova, however, seem \ more unusual, and the most blatant attack on artistic freedom in \ some time. It's not clear whether these cases represent a \ concerted effort to stifle expression in 2010, indeed it seems more \ likely to be simply coincidence that these cases come on the heels \ of each other. Nevertheless, these difficult cases show that \ repression remains a tool of state policy in Uzbekistan. All of \ them, but particularly the case against Ahmedova, will likely bring \ much negative international attention to Uzbekistan. These cases \ argue for stepping up the "human dimension" component of our \ bilateral dialogue with Uzbekistan. End comment. \

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